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COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Twelfth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE FIRST PART (PUBLIC)*
OF THE 18th MEETING

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Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Thursday, 11 May 1995, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Mr. ALSTON

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* The summary record of the second part (closed) of the meeting appears as document E/C.12/1995/SR.18/Add.1.

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The meeting was called to order at 3.20 p.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS (agenda item 6) (continued)

REVIEW OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS: Panama (continued)

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, Mr. Kam and Mr. Amores (Panama) took places at the Committee table.

2. Mr. AMORES (Panama) observed that the present Government had been in power in his country only since 1994, and had inherited the 1994 budget as well as the proposed 1995 budget. A shortfall of budgeted external funds had forced cuts even in the sectors requiring the most urgent action. In an effort to achieve a fair distribution of wealth, the Government was seeking economic development together with social justice. It thus gave priority to the issue of poverty and the pressing needs of the most marginalized.

3. Reviewing Panama's geographic, demographic, political and economic situation, he observed that more than half of its total population of 2.5 million was concentrated in the greater metropolitan area of about 17 square kilometres comprising the port cities of Panama City and Colón, which were also the economic, social, administrative and cultural hub of the country. Panama's economy, unlike that of most Latin American countries, was based on the service sector, which generated 75 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP). Its GDP had risen by about 7.9 per cent between 1991 and 1993, so that in 1994 Panama was given a high human development index. However, that growth had had little effect in reducing poverty because of the unequal distribution of income - the average monthly income being estimated at about B 245 and the average basic household food basket at B 210. The percentage of the population living in poverty had risen from 38 per cent in 1983 to 50 per cent in 1990, 25 per cent of whom were living in critical or extreme poverty. At the same time the external debt amounted to B 5.7 million. Some positive developments, on the other hand, were the higher life expectancy of 73 years, the 88-per-cent literacy rate, the 81-per-cent access to health care and the 77-per-cent access to basic services like drinking water, sewerage, sanitation and electricity.

4. With specific reference to the housing situation in Panama, the main challenges were: the lack of access by the needy to available public and private housing; a growing housing shortage; a shortage of funds to meet the growing demand; the high cost of construction materials, which restricted the number of those able to build their own homes; and the absence of an institutional framework integrating the technical, financial, administrative and social components of economic development. In addition, the 1989 invasion had deepened the housing crisis because so many buildings had been demolished.

5. In 1993, according to the Ministry of Housing, about half of the approximately 200,000 housing units were concentrated in the province of Panama, one of the nine provinces in the country. More than 8,000 homes had been made available to low-income families, but that barely began to meet the demand, especially of the most needy.

6. Urban slums built by squatters were a great problem in Panama, as in other developing countries. Since 1992, approximately 300 such informal settlements housing approximately 63,000 families - and 13 per cent of the total population - had been inventoried, but thanks to government assistance and transfers to public housing, there were now only about 200 such settlements housing 30,000 families. Those slums had grown up in response to the rural-to-urban migration, the deterioration of housing and the housing shortage, although most of the settlements had in fact been deliberately organized by outsiders for political motives. The slums were becoming a social, environmental, urban and political problem of incalculable proportions.

7. A complete absence of city planning, together with a purely commercial approach to urban development, had fostered excessive concentrations and improvised solutions, and allowed formless cities to develop, with an irremediable impact upon natural resources and the environment. The greater metropolitan area of Panama City and Colón was a case in point.

8. The main objective of his Government's housing policy, which had first priority, was to raise the standard of accommodation generally and for low-income families in particular, through concerted action by the public and private sectors to lower the cost of housing construction, to establish realistic standards, to reduce the red tape involved in obtaining building permits and to make it easier to obtain credit. Comprehensive legislation would be introduced, touching on the financial, technical and social aspects, and encouraging the participation of private businesses in the construction of public housing. In addition, co-owned and co-managed dwellings would be encouraged on plots with basic utilities, under a housing-improvement programme providing loans for construction materials. Squatter communities would also be rehabilitated. Currently, 6,000 plots with basic utilities were being developed, and 13 to 15 such communities would be established throughout the country. The Government had recently set the legal minimum size of such dwellings at 42 square metres, up from the earlier 25 square metres.

9. A metropolitan plan for Panama City and Colón was under study, under which the Urban Development Department and the Community Programme for Infrastructural and Capital Goods Investment would be reorganized.

10. The housing crisis in Panama would be difficult to resolve in the next five years, especially with the limited resources available. The Government needed help from international financial institutions, as well as technical assistance in providing advanced training to Panama's experts and professionals, if the Government was to offer its people decent and proper human housing.

11. Mr. KAM (Panama), speaking as Permanent Representative of Panama, observed that Panama had been the first to invite the Committee to send a technical mission to its country and believed that an important international precedent for cooperation on human rights had been established. The invitation had been an indication that Panama had entered into a new stage of constructive cooperation with all human rights bodies within the United Nations and elsewhere. A new transparency also characterized its foreign policy as a whole.

12. Pursuant to its avowed intention of strengthening the protection of human rights in Panama, the Government had in 1994 established a national commission composed of Government officials and representatives of non-governmental organizations, to promote the establishment of the post of Ombudsman in Panama. Furthermore, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees would, again at the invitation of the Government, be visiting Panama early next June to discuss the Government's intention to set up a wide-ranging programme to protect and strengthen human rights in the country. The Committee's visiting mission should be seen as a first step in that direction.

13. The housing situation in Panama was critical. The Committee's mission had observed that for itself, but had also noted the Government's firm political will to attack the problem vigorously and in a spirit of cooperation. The resources, however, were lacking and he hoped that, as an outcome of the mission, bilateral and international financial and credit institutions would be persuaded to grant Panama's requests for assistance with housing. Although Panama's housing problems were perhaps not as serious as in some other countries, they were acute for each individual involved; and the Government's social policy centred on satisfying its population's basic needs.

14. He expressed his Government's appreciation for the Committee's mission and its intention to continue the dialogue and cooperation, and he transmitted to the Chairman the letter from the Minister of Housing.

15. The CHAIRPERSON reaffirmed the Committee's strong appreciation of the welcome its technical assistance mission had received in Panama. He was confident that an important precedent had been created, and that it was the beginning of a period of close cooperation with the Government of Panama.

16. Mr. TEXIER expressed the appreciation of the members of the mission for the great openness of the discussions that had been held at all levels of Government and with individual members of the population, and for the first-hand look it had been afforded at the housing situation in Panama. He particularly thanked Mr. Amores, who was clearly an activist for housing rights, for having served as their guide.

17. Mr. WIMER ZAMBRANO said that he too had appreciated the opportunity to see the problems in Panama first hand. In the process, he had learned much about the country and its people and seen the Government's wholehearted commitment to improving their lot.

18. Mr. Kam and Mr. Amores (Panama) withdrew.

19. Mr. WIMER ZAMBRANO read out a letter from the Minister of Housing of Panama addressed to the Chairperson of the Committee, in which, expressing appreciation for the Committee's mission of technical assistance conducted by Mr. Texier and himself and reiterating his Government's commitment to human rights, the Minister submitted to the Committee a formal request for assistance from the United Nations and its specialized agencies in

facilitating the transfer of technology appropriate for the construction of low-cost emergency housing, and in providing professional training in human settlements, urban planning, community organization and development, and the exchange of information on innovative approaches in the field; and also for funds which would allow the competent Panamanian authorities to attend international meetings and conferences relating to housing and social development.

The public part of the meeting rose at 4.05 p.m.